Draft Risk and Crisis Communication Plan

August 15, 2006
(Note: This is a draft plan only. Items and sections may need to be added, deleted, or revised based on the agency using the plan.)

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I. Purpose of this document

This document contains an operational plan for [insert agency name] to implement effective risk communication in a crisis or emergency. It includes communication policies and procedures as they relate to the agency's mission, goals, objectives, roles and responsibilities, protocols, audiences, messages, media outreach, evaluation, and operational details needed to integrate the plan with daily operations.

The plan describes communication policies and procedures to be followed by the agency in a crisis or emergency. The plan can, however, be applied to a wide range of non-crisis situations.

The plan covers the following communication topics:

(a) what should be done
(b) how it should it be done
(c) by whom it is to be done

The plan begins with a short statement of protocols and policies followed by a collection of procedural checklists.

II. Risk and Crisis Communication Mission, Goals, and Objectives

The risk and crisis communication mission, goals, and objectives of the agency during a crisis or emergency include:

- Provide the public, policymakers, emergency responders, partner agencies, the media, agency staff, subject matter experts, and other stakeholders access to timely, accurate, clear, consistent and credible information.
- Address, as quickly as possible, rumors, inaccuracies and misperceptions.
- Provide accurate, consistent and accessible information and materials through the coordination of communication efforts with partner agencies.

- Fulfill information requests from the media, the public, heath care providers, policymakers, emergency responders, partner agencies, agency staff, subject matter experts, and other stakeholders.
- Eliminate or reduce public fear or inappropriate behavior.
- Direct public action as determined by leadership

III. Risk and Crisis Communication Roles and Responsibilities

In a crisis or emergency, timely, accurate, clear, consistent, and credible information is critical. Heightened fear and misinformation can thwart efforts to reach affected populations and provide adequate control measures. Armed with factual information, the media, public, and partner agencies can be powerful allies in responding effectively to a crisis or emergency. Coordination between partners is extremely important, particularly in a crisis that occurs in more than one geographical location or jurisdiction. A consistent message must be provided to maintain smooth operations and credibility.

If a crisis occurs in multiple geographical locations, the agency will issue news releases and handle media inquiries from agency headquarters. However, members of the communications team staff may be dispatched to a central location in the affected area to assist and issue news releases in the field. Every effort will be made to notify all partner organizations and partners mentioned in any news release before it is sent to the media.

It will also be necessary for the agency to be in frequent contact with on site emergency responders, both to receive information about the local situations and to send helpful information. Frequent reports should be coming into the agency from an enhanced local surveillance network activated during the emergency. At the same time, alerts should be going out to important partners and stakeholders.

IV. Protocols

1. Crisis/Emergency Notification

In the event of a crisis or emergency, the agency Director, or his or her designees, shall notify appropriate individuals and organizations in accordance with agency protocols.

2. Activation of the Communication Plan

The Agency Director, or his or her designees, has the authority to activate the risk and crisis communication plan.

3. Information Verification and Approval

The following individuals will approve information before it is released to the public and media. When possible, this clearance will be completed simultaneously and in person.

Office of the Director or his/her designees	[Name of Director]
Subject matter experts	[Name of experts -- varies according to the nature of the crisis]
Director of Communications or his/her designees	[Name of Director]

Some material may require approval from partner agencies. The Director of Communications or his/her designees will, as appropriate, maintain contact with their counterparts in partner agencies and have access to 24/7 contact information.

4. Disclosure of Sensitive Information

The agency will routinely provide summary, statistical or aggregate information that does not identify an individual. When in the best interest of the public, the agency may disclose non-identifying individual level data to the public according to law and as set out in agency directives. Recognizing that an informed population is more likely to protect itself against threats, the agency will seek to balance this interest with a fundamental respect for the privacy of individuals in determining the time, place, manner and type of information disclosed. Accordingly, the agency will use the following guidelines:

- When disclosure of individual level data is in the best interest of the public, the agency will disclose only information related to age, gender and geographical location.
- The agency will not disclose additional information unless disclosing the information would have strong public health, safety, or environmental significance and would be necessary to prevent, mitigate or abate injury or harm.
- To the extent practical and where it is appropriate, the agency will consult with its staff, its partners agencies, and/or the individual or their family prior to any disclosure of individual level data.
- The current or present condition or prognosis of the individual does not affect nor diminish the privacy concerns and rights of the individual.

5. Designated Spokespersons

Unless otherwise indicated, the agency Director is the designated key spokesperson for the agency in a crisis or emergency. Backup will come from a pool of agency personnel depending on the crisis or emergency, the individual's expertise, and their assigned duties during the emergency. Emergency contact information for these individuals is included in this plan.

6. Creating a Joint Information Center

In a major crisis or emergency, a joint information center (JIC) will likely be established as a central point for coordination of emergency public information, public affairs activities. and media access to information about the latest developments. The JIC is a physical location where public affairs staff from involved agencies come together to ensure the coordination and quick release of accurate and consistent information to the media and the public.

The JIC serves as the primary point of contact for the media for information regarding all emergency response, recovery and mitigation programs provided by public sector and private sector agencies. This includes providing the media with accurate and timely information on emergency operations, working with members of the media to encourage accurate and constructive news coverage, monitoring media coverage to ensure critical messages are being reported, and identifying potential issues or problems that could have an impact on public confidence in the response and recovery effort.

If it becomes necessary to establish a JIC at both agency headquarters and near the scene of the emergency, the release of information between the two must be well coordinated to the greatest extent possible.

Before its release, information from the various participating agencies will be coordinated to the maximum extent possible to ensure consistency and accuracy. All participating agencies in the JIC may continue to use their own mechanisms for releasing information.

Various government agencies, as well as voluntary and private responding organizations, are encouraged to participate in and share the resources of the JIC. If being together at the JIC is not feasible, all organizations are encouraged to conduct their information activities in cooperation with the JIC.

9. Web Sites

The agency may elect to establish and maintains multiple Web site related to the crisis or emergency. One Web site should be geared for the working media and one Web site should be geared for the public. Web sites for other stakeholders should be developed as needed. These sites should be considered a valuable tool to efficiently communicate with the public in a crisis or emergency. They:

- Serve as a rapid way to update all media simultaneously.
- Permit links to help the media collect background information.
- Can be accessed 24/7
- Can be accessed while communications staff are working with other media.
- Allow rumors, myths, and misinformation to be addressed without drawing undue attention.
- Allow graphic, sound, and video material to be made readily available.

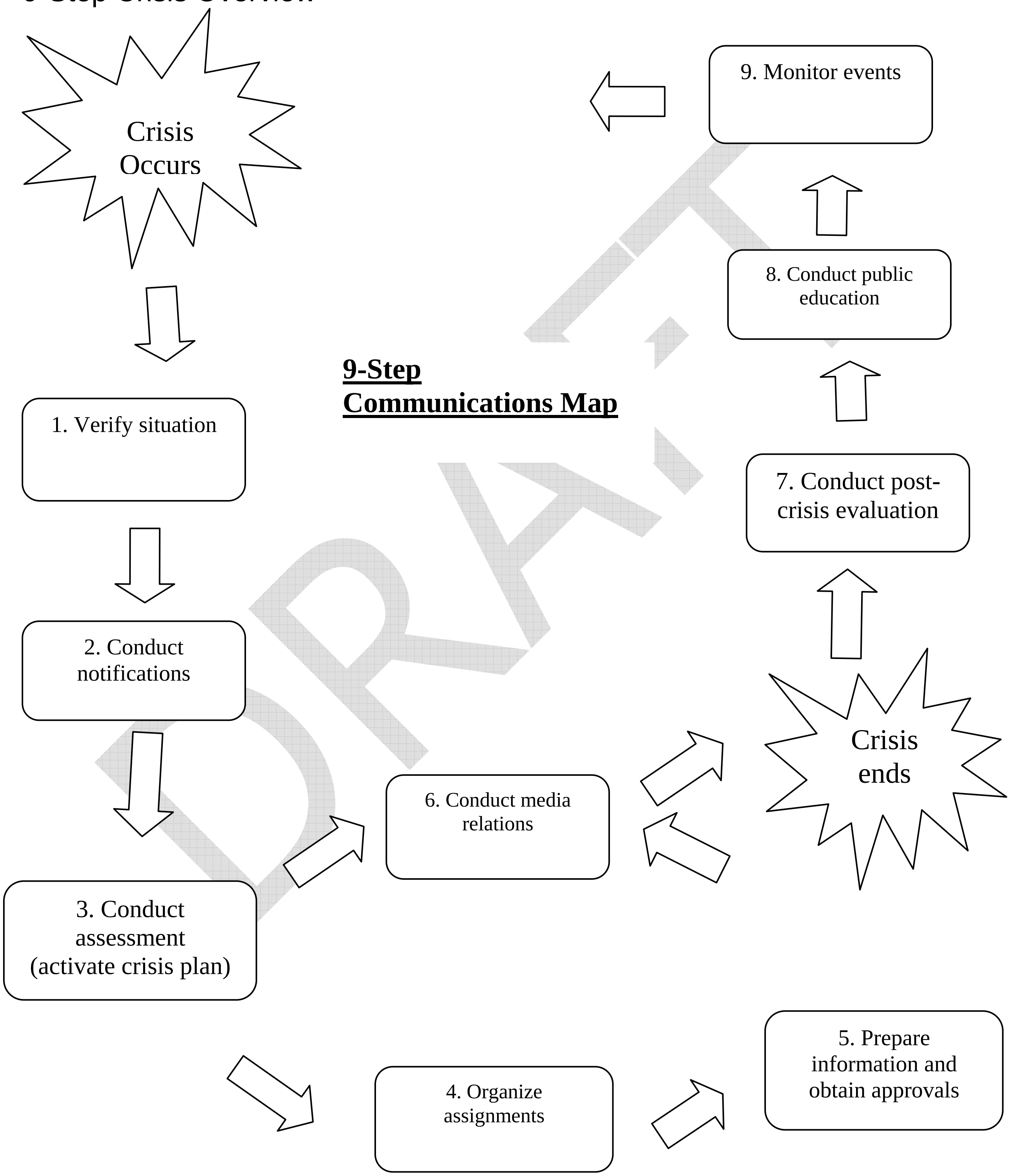
V. Risk and Crisis Communications Leadership

The agency's Communications Director coordinates all agency communications. The Communications director reports all activities to the agency Director and is responsible for activating the Communications Plan. The Communications Director:

- Handles all media relations related to crisis
- Assists with all aspects of procedures involved with a Joint Information Center, if established.
- Appoints spokespersons for the agency
- Identifies Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)
- Directs the media to approved information/materials
- Coordinates personnel to handle media logistics, e.g., logging media requests
- Determines the need for off-site referrals to other agency experts
- Gathers ongoing data about the crisis
- Monitors media reporting
- Develops and tests messages
- Manages the development of backgrounder materials, Director's statement, fact sheets, message maps, and other materials for internal and external audiences
- Manages approvals of messages and materials
- Attends SME meetings/conference calls
- Interviews SMEs to develop messages and supporting materials
- Manages SME interface (experts who lend credibility to agency's message, including non-government SMEs)

VI. Communication Tools and Checklists

9-Step Crisis Overview



Step #1. Verify situation

Agency communications staff are responsible for initial verification of the situation. It is important to recognize that initial information from subject matter experts, the media, and other sources may not be complete or accurate, and what may seem like a crisis to one source may not be to others.

- Get the facts.

- Obtain information from additional sources to put the event in perspective.

- Ascertain where the information originated and determine its credibility. For example:

  - Did the information come from another government agency?
  - Did the information come from a media source?
  - Did the information come from a Web site?

- Review and critically judge all information.

- Determine whether the information is consistent with other sources.

- Determine whether the characterization of the event is plausible.

- Clarify information through staff and managers.

- Attempt to verify the magnitude of the event.

- Begin to identify staffing and resource needs to meet the expected media interest.

- Determine who should be notified of this potential crisis.

Step #2. Conduct notifications

Once an event is verified, the agency Communications Director determines appropriate notifications.

Mandatory Notification and Coordination

- Director
- Deputy Directors
- Assistant Directors
- Emergency Response Coordinators
- Others

Secondary Notification and Coordination (depending on the event)

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
- Others as needed

Step #3. Conduct assessment (activate communications plan)

Throughout the event, continue to gather information and try to determine the severity of the situation and the potential impact on operations, resources, and staffing. Based on the initial assessment, and with approval of the agency Director, the Director of Communications activates the agency risk and crisis communications plan.

Results

- Determine the agency/office/individual in charge of managing the crisis. Ensure direct and frequent contact with the office in charge.

- Continue to gather and check the facts. What happened? What was done to prevent this situation from happening? What can be done to prevent it from getting worse?

- Determine what the agency is doing to end this crisis. Is there an investigation? Who's involved in the investigation?

- Determine what other agencies/organizations are doing to solve this crisis.
- Determine who is being affected by this crisis. What are their perceptions? What do they want and need to know?
- Determine what the public should be doing.
- Activate media monitoring.
- Activate internet monitoring.
- Determine what is being said about the event.
- Determine if what is being said about the event is accurate.
- Determine consistency of information across sources.

Crisis Assessment Tool

Use the questions below to assess the "crisis level." This assessment can help the agency determine the staffing and resources needed to respond to the situation. It also helps differentiate events when there is more than one crisis going on at a time.

Level A Crisis – A true crisis or emergency. A 24-hour operation may be necessary. (First three boxes checked.)

Level B Crisis – An intense crisis, but not a crisis for public information purposes. Communications office may need to extend its hours of operation. (First box not checked, second or third boxes checked and the majority of the others checked.)

Level C Crisis – A media frenzy. (Boxes 1 and 3 not checked, second box checked and a majority of the others checked.)

Level D Crisis – A limited crisis. (Less than 50 percent of the boxes checked and the first four boxes not checked.)

- Is this a legitimate crisis or emergency requiring widespread public education to prevent further harm?
- Is this the "first," "worst" or "biggest" of its kind?
- Are significant losses of life or property expected?

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- Is the event occurring in a densely populated area?
- Is the event of national or international significance?
- Does the event involve children or special populations?
- Does the event involve a consumer product, service, or industry?
- Does the event involve sensitive international trade or political relations?
- Is this event within the scope of the agency's responsibility?
- Was the agency's responsible for this event occurring?
- Is the event possibly deliberate or intentional?
- Is the situation getting worse?
- Could the event become more serious?
- Is media interest significant?
- Is this a legitimate health, safety, or environmental concern?
- Are there potential long-term health, safety, or environmental effects related to this event?
- Does the event involve a criminal investigation?
- Is the agency well equipped or trained to manage a media response of this magnitude?

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Step #4. Organize assignments

Initial organizational issues

- Determine who is managing the event programmatically and scientifically?
- How should communications staff interface with the program staff in charge of managing the crisis? Are there meetings that communications staff should attend?
- Have agency offices established communications with each other?
- What are the Agency's priorities at this point?
- What Agency resources are needed?
- Is Agency staffing sufficient?
- Who will be the agency's lead spokesperson for this event?
- Does the agency need Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) as additional spokespeople?
- Should the communications office operate 10, 12, 20 or 24 hours a day?
- Should the communications office operate 5, 6, or 7 days a week?
- Will communications staff be expected to travel?
- Will supplemental funds be needed?
- Will consultant or contractor support be needed?

Ongoing organizational issues

- What do investigators say about the potential for the crisis getting worse?
- Could events result in more intense public/media interest?
- What rumors or points of conflict have been identified?
- How should the Agency respond to these issues? Is the agency response working?

- Should the agency continue to be the primary source of information for the media about this crisis or should some issues be more appropriately addressed by other government entities?
- Are communication teams operating with more or less equal intensity? How can the agency improve efficiency? Would reassignments help?
- Are resources sufficient?
- Should the agency reset times for daily updates to media (e.g., set a time for a media update via web and broadcast fax) or cancel the regular updates?
- Are daily/weekly SME briefings appropriate to reduce the demand for one-on-one interviews with SMEs?
- Should special deployments of personnel be extended or others tapped or returned to normal duties?
- Should hours of operations be increased or scaled back?
- Are supplemental funds needed to meet public/media demand for information?
- What is the agency learning from the public and media that could be useful to the agency's investigators and policy managers?

Partner involvement

- Are partner organizations concerned about their own reputations?
- Which partners are or should be involved in this crisis?
- How do partners want to get involved in the agency's response?
- Have traditional agency partners been given updates?

Step #5. Prepare information and obtain approvals

This function includes all message development and materials development activities, the approval process, and coordination of information sources within the Agency.

Message development

- Who are our audiences? Who's been affected by this event? Who's upset or concerned? Who needs to be alerted to this situation?
- What are audiences' perceptions and information needs?
- What do media want to know?
- How should the agency show caring, empathy, listening, and compassion?
- What are the facts? What happened?
- What is our policy on this issue?
- Should people be worried?
- What is the agency doing about this issue? How is the agency solving the problem?
- What did the agency do to prevent this from happening?
- What other agencies or third parties are involved? What are they saying?
- What should the public be doing?
- What public information is available?
- When will more information be available?
- Where should the public go for credible information?

Information approval process

At all times, the agency Director, or his or her designees, will approve all information for public use. It is critical that all parties involved in the approval process understand the need for timeliness and responsiveness in disseminating information to the public.

Step #6. Conduct media relations

General media relations guidelines remain in effect during crisis events. A comprehensive list of guidelines can be found in "Effective Media Communications in Public Health Emergencies: A World Health Organization Handbook," authored by Dr. R. Hyer and Dr. V. Covello. Listed below is a sampling of considerations found in the Handbook..

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Likely media questions

- Who’s in charge?
- What are you doing for the people who got hurt?
- Is the situation under control?
- What can we expect?
- Why did this happen?
- Why wasn’t this prevented from happening?
- What else can go wrong?
- When did you begin working on this (were notified of this, determined this)?
- What does this/these data/information/results mean?
- What bad things aren’t you telling us?

When talking to the media …

- Provide only information that has been approved by the appropriate managers. Don’t speculate.
- Repeat the facts about the event.
- Describe the data collection and investigation process.
- Describe what the agency is doing about the crisis.
- Explain what the public should be doing.
- Describe how to obtain more information about the situation.

Alternatives to “no comment”

When the agency is not able to talk about an event, rather than saying “no comment” try to establish an open line of communications in response to media inquires. Possible responses:

- "We've just learned about the situation and are trying to get more complete information now."

- "All our efforts are directed at bringing the situation under control, so I don't want to speculate about the cause of the incident."

- "My expertise is in …. Let me have (name of subject expert) call you back."

- "We're preparing a statement on that now. Can I fax it to you in about two hours?"

Step #7. Conduct post-crisis evaluation

As soon as feasible following a crisis, the agency should conduct an evaluation of its response.

- Compile and analyze comments and criticisms from agency employees, the public, emergency response personnel, elected officials, the media, and other stakeholders.
- Analyze and discuss media coverage.
- Report results of comments and analysis to agency leadership.
- Determine need for changes to the agency communications plan
- Determine need to improve policies and processes.
- Institutionalize changes with appropriate training.
- Revise crisis plan policies and procedures based on lessons learned.

Step #8. Conduct public education

Once the crisis has subsided, the agency may need to carry out additional public education activities.

- Should the agency be educating the public about issues related to this crisis?
- What are the public's perceptions and information needs related to this crisis?
- Does the public understand the agency's messages on this issue? Are they taking appropriate actions?
- Should the agency also consider audiences that were not involved in the crisis for public education?
- Should messages related to this crisis event be incorporated into other communication activities?
- Should the agency use this event to highlight related health, safety, or environmental messages?

Step #9. Monitor events

Communications staff should monitor events and exchange information on an ongoing basis during a crisis or emergency. The checklist should include:

- Media monitoring
- Internet monitoring
- Ongoing exchanges of information with stakeholders
- Ongoing communications with partners
- Ongoing communications with subject matter experts
- Monitoring of public opinion data and other agency research

Appendices

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Appendix A: Risk and Crisis Communications Action Plan

The [insert agency name] has established a protocol for the production, approval and dissemination of media releases to the public in a crisis. It is the policy of the agency to keep the public informed during actual and perceived crises through cooperation with other organizations.

The Public Information Office (PIO) is responsible for gathering information about the crisis from internal, local, regional, national, and international sources. With the assistance of Agency staff (and involved, external agencies, if necessary), the PIO assesses and analyzes that information and processes it into formats understandable and useful to the general public.

At all times, the agency Director or his or her designees will approve all information for public use. It is critical that all parties involved in the approval process understand the need for timeliness and responsiveness in disseminating information to the public.

<u>Initial Work</u>

Within the first 30 minutes following notification the following actions should be taken:

- All media calls to any source about the event are to be routed initially to Agency's public information office. This is to ensure that reporters get consistent messages and to ensure that valuable professional staff time is spent addressing the potential problems, rather than dealing with the media.
- The PIO will establish contact with local public information offices.
- The Public Information Office will immediately notify other government agencies about the situation, if applicable.
- The Public information Office will notify the public information office at international or national organizations, if applicable.

<u>Continuing efforts:</u>

- The public information office, working with other agencies, and depending on the volume and nature of the calls, will decide how to handle the media. The public information office will notify other government offices about their plans, if applicable.
- If the situation warrants it, a news conference will be called. The Agency Director or his or her designee will lead the news conference and work with public information office to determine who else needs to be involved.
- All news conferences will be held at [insert location} or another central location.

<u>Regular Briefings</u>

- The public information office, working with other government agencies, will decide what level of regular briefing needs to occur.
- If there are few new details, then briefings at regular intervals.
- All briefing releases will quote the Director or designee as the spokesperson.

News Conferences

- News conferences will be called only if there are newsworthy details.
- All news conferences will be led by agency Director or his or her designee.
- Notification of news conferences will occur in the following fashion:
  - Fax
  - Telephone calls to the local media [insert names of media contacts, telephone numbers, fax numbers, and email addresses)

News Releases

- News releases will be sent to all media via fax and/or email.
- All news releases will be first provided to affected agencies and organizations before release to the media.
- If only a particular geographical area is involved, local media in the affected area will be called to ensure that they received the release.

Deactivation of the Plan

This plan remains in effect until the agency Director determines it is time to deactivate. At any point, when law enforcement becomes the lead in the investigation (such as in a terrorist event), the Agency will hand over control to the appropriate law enforcement office and stands ready to support that office as requested.

Appendix B. Media Relations Guidelines

The roles of the Public Information Office (PIO) include, but are not limited to:

- ✓ Establishing good relationships with the media
- ✓ Keeping agency leaders appraised of key issues in media
- ✓ Being aware of local news and events
- ✓ Writing and disseminating agency press releases, fact sheets, Q&As (Questions and Answers), and other information materials
- ✓ Liaison between reporters and program staff
- ✓ Gatekeeper of public information
- ✓ Designation spokespersons

Report all press inquiries

When a reporter calls, ask: Am I the best person to respond? Contact the PIO prior to any media interview.

Agency staff should ALWAYS inform the Public Information Office and their supervisor of any media contact they have received, regardless of whether they granted an interview.

Preparing for an Interview

Questions *for* the reporter:

- ✓ What is the story about and what type of story is it?
- ✓ Who have you talked to and what documents have you seen?
- ✓ When and where will the story run?
- ✓ What does the reporter *believe* about the story?

Television Interviews

Always try to arrange for the interview at your office. Avoid giving "behind the desk" interviews. Choose an outside courtyard or more neutral location. Or if the story requires, a location that lends itself to the story (e.g., a laboratory), choose a location that allows you to stay in control of your environment.

During television interviews, remember that how you look is often more important than what you say. Communication studies show that up to 75 percent of message content is received through body language. Be mindful of:

- Wardrobe—avoid loud, confusing patterns, showy jewelry, etc.
- Eye Contact – do not look into the camera; address the reporter directly
- Body language – be aware of your posture; hand movements; nervous tics; playing with pens; tapping fingers, etc.

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<u>Newspaper interviews</u>

- If not prepared, arrange a call back time
- More like to ask for substantiating documents or statistics
- Be mindful of their deadlines

<u>Radio Interviews</u>

- If not prepared, arrange a call back time
- Concise, simple messages; very fast paced. KNOW YOUR SOUND BITE.
- Impressions are made by your voice—SLOW DOWN

<u>Interview Do's</u>

- Be honest and accurate.
- Stick to your key message(s).
- State your conclusions first, then provide supporting data.
- Be forthcoming to the extent you decide beforehand.
- Offer to get information you don't have.
- Explain the subject and content.
- Stress the facts.
- Give a reason if you can't discuss a subject.
- Correct mistakes by stating you would like an opportunity to clarify.

<u>Interview Don'ts</u>

- Tell the news organization which reporter you prefer.
- Ask for specific questions in advance.
- Insist they do not ask about certain subjects.
- Demand your remarks not be edited.
- Insist an adversary not be interviewed close-up.
- Assume it will be easy.
- Lie or try to cloud the truth.
- Improvise or dwell on negative allegations.
- Raise issues you don't want to see in the story.
- Fail to think it through ahead of time.
- Use jargon or assume the facts speak for themselves.
- Speculate, discuss hypothetical situations.
- Demand an answer not be used.
- Say "NO COMMENT."

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After the Interview—Do's

- Remember you are still on the record.
- Be helpful. Volunteer to get information. Make yourself available. Respect deadlines.
- Watch for and read the resulting report.
- Alert the PIO to any inaccuracies in the story.

After the Interview--Don'ts:

- Assume the interview is over or the equipment is off.
- Refuse to talk further.
- Ask, "How did I do?"
- Ask to review the story before publication or broadcast.
- Complain to the reporter's boss first.

Appendix C. Questions Commonly Asked by Journalists During a Crisis

Experience shows that journalists are likely to ask six types of questions in a crisis (who, what, where, when, why, how) that relate to three broad topics: (1) What happened? (2) What caused it to happen? (3) What does it mean? You can use these questions as a start to develop simple questions and answers or full message maps. The questions were developed by a research team led by Dr. Vincent T. Covello at the Center for Risk Communication.

Specific questions that may apply to any type of crisis include the following:

What is your name and title?

What are you job responsibilities?

What are your qualifications?

Can you tell us what happened?

When did it happen?

Where did it happen?

Who was harmed?

How many people were harmed?

Are those that were harmed getting help?

How certain are you about this information?

How are those who were harmed getting help?

Is the situation under control?

How certain are you that the situation is under control?

Is there any immediate danger?

What is being done in response to what happened?

Who is in charge?

What can we expect next?

What are you advising people to do?

How long will it be before the situation returns to normal?

What help has been requested or offered from others?

What responses have you received?

Can you be specific about the types of harm that occurred?

What are the names of those that were harmed?

Can we talk to them?

How much damage occurred?

What other damage may have occurred?

How certain are you about the damages?

How much damage do you expect?

What do you doing now?

Who else is involved in the response?

Why did this happen?

What was the cause?

Did you have any forewarning that this might happen?

Why wasn’t this prevented from happening?

What else can go wrong?

If you are not sure of the cause, what is your best guess?

Who caused this to happen?

Who is to blame?

Could this have been avoided?

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Do you think those involved handled the situation well enough?

When did your response to this begin?

When were you notified that something had happened?

Who is conducting the investigation?

What are you going to do after the investigation?

What have you found out so far?

Why was more not done to prevent this from happening?

What is your personal opinion?

What are you telling your own family?

Are all those involved in agreement?

Are people over reacting?

Which laws are applicable?

Has anyone broken the law?

How certain are you about the laws?

Has anyone made mistakes?

How certain are you about the mistakes?

Have you told us everything you know?

What are you not telling us?

What effects will this have on the people involved?

What precautionary measures were taken?

Do you accept responsibility for what happened?

Has this ever happened before?

Can this happen elsewhere?

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What is the worst case scenario?

What lessons were learned?

Were those lessons implemented?

What can be done to prevent this from happening again?

What would you like to say to those that have been harmed and to their families?

Is there any continuing the danger?

Are people out of danger? Are people safe?

Will there be inconvenience to employees or to the public?

How much will all this cost?

Are you able and willing to pay the costs?

Who else will pay the costs?

When will we find out more?

What steps are being taken to avoid a similar event?

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